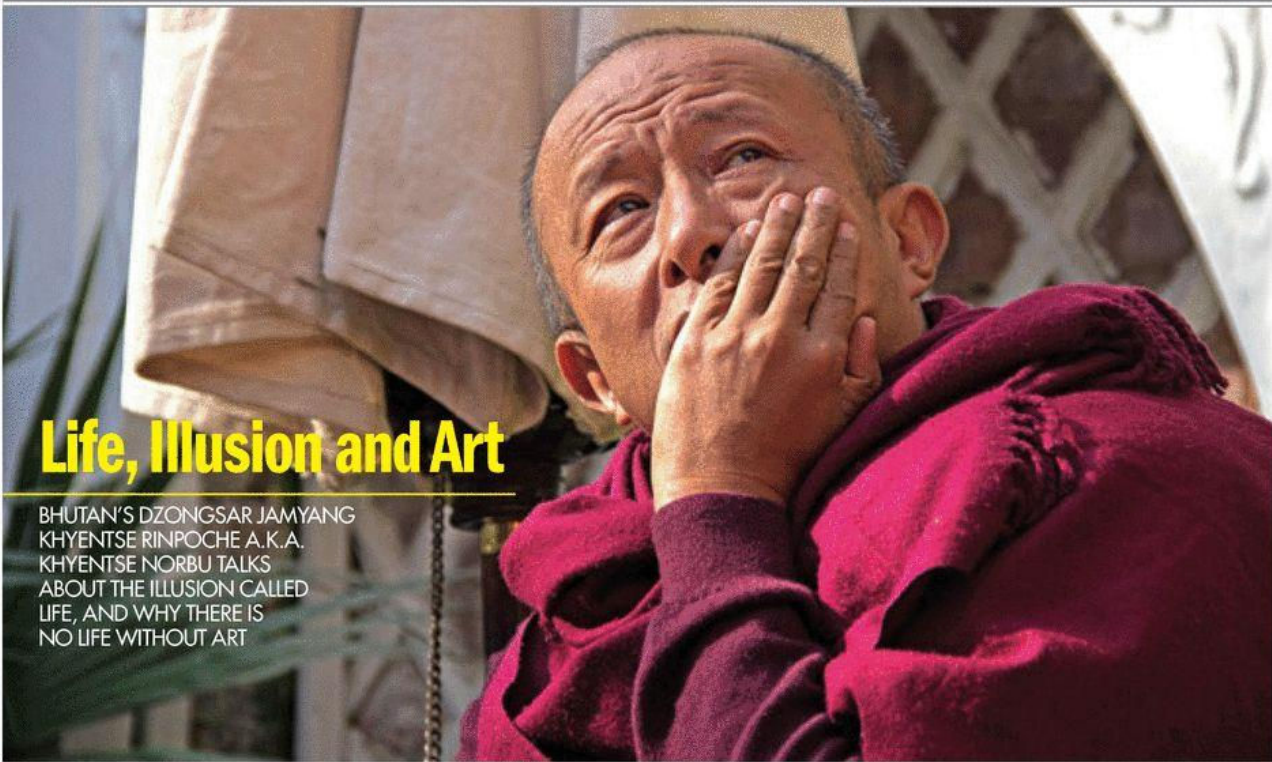


The Himalayan

ON SATURDAY



Life, Illusion and Art

BHUTAN'S DZONGSAR JAMYANG KHYENTSE RINPOCHE A.K.A. KHYENTSE NORBU TALKS ABOUT THE ILLUSION CALLED LIFE, AND WHY THERE IS NO LIFE WITHOUT ART

Illustration: Pradhar / THT

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Kathmandu

Life is bare and ugly in itself; it is art that makes life beautiful and worth living. That is how Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche from Bhutan renowned as Khyentse Norbu acknowledges the importance of art in life. He is a high-ranked incarnate lama in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Besides overseeing monasteries and other Buddhist institutions in many parts of the world under his patronage and spreading Buddha's words around the world, he is an avid filmmaker.

Understanding life

Film, for him, is a medium, a language, a tool to express emotions, to express one's situations, to express the situation of the world, of the country, family, culture, traditions. "Film is a medium, like a typewriter or a pen. You can write something really bad with the pen and make everybody angry and fight with each other. Or, you can write something very profound, very enlightening and compassionate."

He advises all to make good use of films/filmmaking for "film is just a medium, what matters is how you use it."

About life, the Rinpoche says it "is an illusion, but we forget that." As such "we think that money is real, relationship is real, power is real, influence is real, success is real, failure is real. And we suffer in the process."

However, he stresses that what we need to know is that it is an illusion. This is where he explains the role of the film (art): "Art can help us understand, especially art like music and film. If we do it properly, it can make us understand

the glimpses of this illusion."

No life without art

And it is this motivation of creating art that connects one to the realm of spirituality. He defines spirituality as the path to transcend this mundane world one sees and hears. Illustrating his view, he says, "I see somebody. He looks good, or he looks bad. But spirituality is the path that will transcend me to go beyond the 'good man' and 'bad man.'"

Then he also says that "art is artificial. It is something you fabricate or create". But, the crux lies in the motivation—"the motivation of creating that is to really tell the truth". "So, sometimes because the actual truth may be beyond words, beyond fabrication, but the only way to share this with the rest of the people is through creation, through fabrication. So, in other words, art is almost like telling lies so that you can tell the truth."

As per him "there would be no life without art" and he believes that "everybody is an artist... a mother singing a lullaby to her baby is a very skilful artist."

Original inspirations

For a long time he was inspired by India's Satyajit Ray. But now his favourite filmmaker is Japan's Yasujiro Ozu.

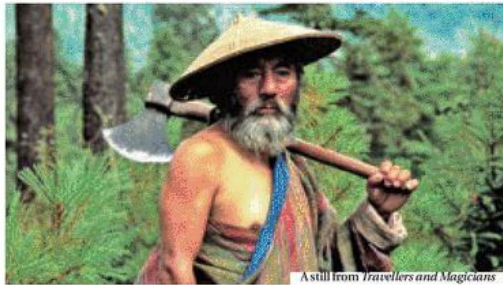
"Ozu's films are about the day-to-day life. He can make a film about a simple event like you interviewing me — and still you would watch because there is drama."

He suggests people to watch films, watch "films that are different". He recommends *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, an art movie directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, a Thai director, and all of Yasujiro Ozu's films, to young Nepali filmmakers.

For him the most important thing in filmmaking is the story. "Your story has to be genuine and original. If I am asked 'How can I make an original story?', my advice to young filmmakers is 'Never despise and look down on your own ideas'. No matter what happens, you should continue making films."

He takes Bollywood and Hollywood films as big obstacles though he likes to watch them as they are "very easy to watch — you do not have to think".

His advice is not to create copies. "Many times, I think



A still from *Travelers and Magicians*

young filmmakers look at Bollywood and Hollywood movies and try to copy from here and from there — do not do that."

Inspiring Nepal

The people are his inspiration. "I like stories that are very mundane and ordinary,"

says this Rinpoche who is the name behind critically acclaimed films like *The Cup*, *Travelers and Magicians*, *Vara: A Blessing*, and *Hema Hema: Sing Me a Song While I Wait*.

He was in Kathmandu for his new film based here in Nepal. Sharing about the inspiration for this new project, he says, "As a Buddhist, especially as a Vajrayana Buddhist, we believe that Nepal in general, and especially Kathmandu, is a very important Mandala, a tantric mandala. This inspired me, so my next film is inspired by that emotion."

His life-long dream is to make a film on the life of Buddha. "This is my desire. Filmmaking is not my job. I have a different job. But I want to make a film on the life of

Buddha. That is important for me, and Nepal is important for this."

Own the Buddha

Linking his dream plan with Nepal's sentiment with Buddha and his birthplace, he says, "Recently I heard that many Nepalis are unhappy because people said the Buddha was not from Nepal. When I heard that Nepalis are unhappy, I was happy."

Why? "Because this means Nepalis care."

He stresses, "They should care... Nepalis should embrace and own the Buddha."

But in his observation Nepalis are not doing that. "Just saying 'Buddha was born in

Lumbini' is not enough. Most Nepalis do not know what Buddha is. If you do not know anything about the Buddha and his teachings, just being unhappy when somebody says the Buddha is not from Nepal is not enough. You have to embrace him, you have to own him."

But how? "You have to celebrate his life as the most important person in Nepal, and he is. You have to make it more — you have to actually institutionalise this."

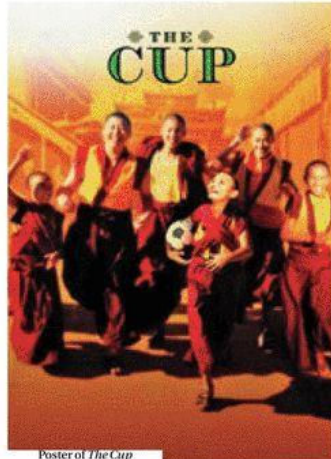
He concludes, "Buddha is Nepal's most important soft-power. Own him, use him, or even commercialise him, if you like. But, do not forget him."

Bodhichitta, the supreme art

After thinking awhile, he says, "Compassion, *bodhichitta*, is the supreme art. Because in the most fundamental level, compassion is when you try to put your feet in other people's shoes, understand other people's position. You will have your own problems, but until I am in your position, I will not understand it."

He adds, "So, the supreme art is putting myself in your position, then I understand. 'Oh I see why you cry.'"

"This is very important, but this is very difficult art — only the big Bodhisattvas can do this, the Buddha can do this."



Poster of *The Cup*



A still from *Vara: A Blessing*



A still from *Hema Hema*